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September 1st, 2010

W400 Writing Narrative RD 1

The Deconstruction of my Writing Ego

I went into my first college creative writing class with an ego. It was during my spring semester of my sophomore year, and I had the idea in my head that I could write any story absolutely flawlessly. This stemmed from my English teachers in high school, who told me at every opportunity that I had a natural gift for writing. While I was in high school I entered, and won, a few writing contests, and a few of my teachers called my parents and encouraged them to help me get published. Although I may have been ahead of most of my peers while I was in high school, college, I would soon find out, was a different scene altogether. I entered Robert Reibein’s fiction writing class confident that I would impress him and my classmates just as much as I had impressed my high school teachers. I was not prepared for the workshops and criticism I would receive, but I knew it would ultimately prove vital to my development as a writer.

Our first assignment focused on language and form in writing, and we did a series of exercises to help us develop a short story based on what we were studying that week. After a week of writing, we would take turns sharing our draft in a workshop setting with our peers. I volunteered to go first, and posted my story on OnCourse for everyone to review before class. My story was about the changed relationship between a teenage girl and her shell-shocked older brother who has just returned from Vietnam. I had read and re-read the draft before submitting it, confident that it would receive glowing views the next day.

Class began and I waited patiently for Professor Reibein to turn the discussion to my piece. I was asked to read it aloud, which I did with confidence, and then the class began their critique. They began with things they liked about what I wrote.

“I like the dialogue that takes place between the brother and sister,” an older, blonde woman said. “It seems very realistic.”

Another guy, closer to my age said, “I like how descriptive she was in it.”

Most of my other classmates agreed, and the professor also agreed with them. As the comments about the aspects that were working began to slow, I noticed that no one commented on the actual plot of the story. Then, Professor Reibein said, “What do you think needs work about Paige’s piece?” and more hands flew up than my astonished brain could process.

Professor Reibein’s comments stuck out in my mind the most. “I think if she made it more modern, like have the brother be coming home from Iraq, it would seem more real. This setting, this time frame, there’s just not a lot there that seems authentic. Also, the relationship between the brother and sister needs to be more like siblings. They seem like lovers, which makes the reader wonder,” he said.

He gave me a copy of my paper and on it was a score of two and a half out of four. I was deflated, outraged, and frustrated. I had put so much into this piece and I knew it wasn’t as horrible as he and everyone else said it was. I went to my next class and brooded the entire time about my defense of the piece. By the end of the day I decided that the class did not understand what I was trying to do, but I would follow everyone’s advice perfectly for the revision.

As the semester continued, the class assignments continued in the same rhythm: we studied an aspect of fiction writing, wrote a rough draft of a short story that focused on what we studied, and then shared with the class. I didn’t share with the class as often as I thought I would because I was afraid of the critiques. My writer’s ego was wounded and broken down. I began to believe that everything I was told about my writing talents weren’t true anymore, or worse, were never true in the first place. But finally, Professor Reibein called on me to share my story that focused on dialogue, and I nervously read it aloud. When I finished, I looked up at Professor Reibein to see he was smiling.

“What worked about this piece?” he asked the class.

One of my fellow students raised her hand. “The dialogue is great. It sounds so realistic, like the banter between a real couple.”

“Yes, I completely agree,” the professor said. “Paige does this so well in her piece. There are a few areas that need tweaking as far as the story goes, but the dialogue is done wonderfully in most places.”

After class ended and I saw that Professor Reibein had given me a four out of four on the draft, I could feel my confidence creep back into my writing. I revised the piece and resubmitted it. I began to see the value in the critiques as I took notes on the comments my professor and the class made on my piece.

Not long after my second revision and submission, Professor Reibein asked us all to sign up for a time to meet with him during his office hours so we could go over our final project for the class. The final project was to pick one of the stories we had written during the semester, flesh it out into a 10-20 page story, and submit it to the class for one last workshop before submitting it to the professor. Professor Reibein wanted to meet with each of us to help us pick out which story we would work on, and to go over our progress throughout the semester.

When I pushed the number five button on the elevator in Cavanaugh Hall, I could feel my stomach flip with nerves. We hadn’t yet discussed the most recent revision I did of my dialogue story, and I was stuck on how to proceed with it. I didn’t know if I wanted it to be my final project, and I didn’t know if Professor Reibein thought I was capable of completing it. When I knocked on his door and then entered his office, I knew that I should be honest with him. I should tell him about how frustrated I was when I began the class and about how unsure I was now that I had been through the critiques.

“So, how are you doing? What are your questions or concerns?” he asked.

I fidgeted. I had never been to a professor’s office hours before and it had been a while since I felt I could be honest with a teacher. College professors intimidated me, and I had to collect myself before I began. “Well, um…” I stalled, trying to make sure I would phrase it so he wouldn’t be offended, “I feel a little discouraged, frustrated, and inspired.”

He smiled. “Good.”

I looked at the ceiling behind his head as I spoke. “When I started the class I guess I thought I was good, because in high school all my teachers told me I was. But then when we began critiques, I just started to doubt myself.”

“Paige, writing is a process. Writers don’t just write something and get it published instantly. Editors, publishers, agents, and colleagues look at it before it goes to print. Taking criticism is just part of it. Am I saying your high school teachers were wrong? No. They’re supposed to encourage you and inspire you and empower you to excel, especially if it’s in their subject, like English,” he explained. “But this is the next level. Critique makes you a better writer. It makes me a better writer. And you’ve proven that with each revision you’ve submitted so far.”

I sighed in relief.